

Turning Towards Each Other

One of the challenges with Parshat Ki Tisa is that it deals with turning away from the proper path rather than turning towards it. After our ancestors made the golden calf, G-d said to Moses “They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them.”¹ Because they turned away from G-d, G-d turned away from them, proclaiming “I see that this is a stiff-necked people. Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them...”² Moses, however, intervenes, refusing to let G-d destroy Israel. He says words which we repeat every fast day: שׁוּב מִחַרְוֹן אַפַּי וְהִנַּחֵם עַל-הָרָעָה לְעַמֶּךָ; “Turn away from Your blazing anger and renounce the plan to punish Your people.”³ In so doing, Moses makes two very important points: Israel remains G-d’s people as opposed to a “stiff-necked” people independent from G-d, and G-d does not need to turn away from Israel just because they have turned away from Him at this particular moment.

¹ Exodus 32:8

² Exodus 32:9-10

³ Exodus 32:12

The term “turn away” struck me because of the work done by marriage therapist Dr. John Gottman. Dr. Gottman writes that the married couples he see who turn towards one another at times of conflict stay together 86% of the time, whereas those who turn away from each other stay together only 33% of the time.⁴ In our tradition, G-d and Israel are a couple, bound together by a ברית, or covenant, just as a married couple is bound by a *Ketubah*. In our portion because Israel has forsaken its end of the bargain, worshiping other gods, G-d is going to follow suit and strike them from the earth-that is until Moses intervenes. He says to G-d, ‘calm down; take a chill pill,’ and he gets G-d to refrain from forsaking the covenant. וינחם ה על-הרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו, “G-d forsook the evil that G-d had said he would do to His people.”⁵

There are two reasons to speak about this today. First we are celebrating the conversion of Amber Marshall, her making the choice to affirm her covenant with G-d as a Jew. In the paper she wrote for the Beit Din, Amber said the following: “It takes effort to be more mindful

⁴ <https://www.gottman.com/blog/turn-toward-instead-of-away/>

⁵ Exodus 32:14

and to think about G-d in all parts of my life. But as I've done so, many things have gained texture and richness. For example, as a non-profit lawyer, classically underpaid and overworked, there have been days I've asked myself — why am I doing this? Why am I putting myself, my partner, my family, and my friends through this? And over the past year, I've found answers in my developing relationship with G-d. It's *tikkun olam*—repairing the world. It's *Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof*—Justice, Justice, Shall you Pursue. These answers make it that much easier to get up and start again the next day after inevitable setbacks and failures. But it's also asking myself if staying that extra hour at work is really necessary. It's focusing on ritual and observance which finally taught me how to make my relationship with G-d a priority. It's seeing how that observance creates more space for family life.”

This paragraph emphasizes the essence of *brit*, of a relationship. Each relationship is a give-and-take, whether the work-family balance, the public-private life or the sacrifices versus benefits. Amber so eloquently stated an essential truth of Judaism—that we get up each and

every day attempting to grow in our relationship with G-d while concurrently striving to make the world into a better place.

The second reason to touch on this is because Amber and Justin will be getting married this coming fall. As I will not be able to do your *aufruf*, I wanted to touch on marriage today. Marriage is one of if not the most important relationship in life, a partner with whom one forms a team. There are benefits as well as responsibilities with marriage, many of which are detailed in the *Ketubah*. Amber had mentioned to me that it was important to her to observe the entire calendar as a Jew before getting married, and she has been doing so this year. I know that in continuing to grow in your Jewish observance (through Shabbat dinners cooked by Justin, not working on Saturdays and exploring keeping a Kosher home) you will also grow in your relationship with one another.

My prayer for you Amber and Justin is that you always **turn towards** each other, recognizing that your relationship supersedes any specific issue at hand, and in so doing may you strengthen your true love each and every day. *Mazal Tov* on this celebration of Amber's conversion and on your soon-to-be marriage to each another. In order to

crystallize the excitement that each of us feels for Amber, please turn to
Page 841 and continue with me responsively.